

“Angels and Shepherds at the Manger”

December 24, 2015

Christmas Eve

In the Charlie Brown Christmas special, there’s a scene when some of the Peanuts kids are making fun of Charlie Brown’s choice of Christmas tree. You remember – the scrawny, scraggly-looking tree – small with a few branches? Lucy says, “You’ve been dumb before Charlie Brown, but this time you really did it! What a tree!” The kids laugh and walk away.

Charlie Brown is upset with himself about getting that particular tree, and then he says, “I guess I really don’t know what Christmas is all about. Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

It’s Linus who takes his thumb out of his mouth and says, “Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.” Then, Linus walks onto the stage and recites the story of the shepherds from Luke chapter 2. Linus even drops his security blanket to use his hands to share the Good News of the angels when they say “Fear not!” Then, Linus walks back to Charlie Brown and says, “That’s what Christmas is all about.”

The story is told that TV network executives were hesitant to include this scene with Linus reciting the Christmas story from Luke. But Charles Schulz questioned them: “If we don’t tell the true meaning of Christmas, who will?” And so the scene remained. Schulz was also clear that he didn’t want a laugh track used in the cartoon because he wanted the audience to enjoy it at their own pace. And so for 50 years, since 1965, we’ve heard the Good News from Linus – simple and true. Linus points us to the real story – the birth of a Savior for all the world, for everyone.

On our journey to Bethlehem, we’ve encountered Mary and Joseph. Both of them said “yes” to God and trusted in God even when things were confusing and uncertain. We met Elizabeth who helped Mary to find joy in this midst of a life-changing event – carrying the Christ child.

And today we meet the shepherds. Hear from one of them tonight.

MEDIA: “THE FIRST CHRISTMAS - SHEPHERD”

Good News to all people – that means you, too. Gospel writer Luke is clear that the shepherds were the first to hear Good News of great joy. They are the only ones to get an invitation to meet Jesus! These men – usually poor, uneducated, living among animals, dirty from their work, “earthy” folks – are the first to meet Jesus the newborn King. Pastor Adam Hamilton relates a story of meeting a shepherd on a visit to Bethlehem. He says he was struck by the man’s gentleness and humility.

Shepherds were certainly not “insiders” – and many times they were loners. They may not have had family with them, and so they were family to each other. They were not the honored guests at anyone’s banquet, and yet they receive and accept the invitation to meet Jesus. Then they go and tell others. They become messengers of the Good News of the birth of Jesus, the Savior!

The shepherds don’t usually make the cut for favorite Christmas pageant character, but each year, when I think about what happened at the manger, I realize that the shepherds teach us what God cares about.

God doesn’t have a list of qualifications for who’s in and who’s out. For me, it’s the truth God chooses each of us – even when we haven’t ever been chosen for anything, even when we don’t feel worthy of God’s love, even when we struggle with the stuff of life, or even when we don’t struggle. God is calling you and me to receive this good news of great joy – that salvation is here!

We are saved from guilt and shame, hopelessness, and fear – and even from death. This past Tuesday, my family celebrated my grandma’s life and faith. She was a person of deep faith in Jesus Christ and had a real sense of being saved from fear of death. She was clear about her need for Jesus, and she wasn’t afraid.

But it’s not just being saved from something; it’s also being saved for joy, love, peace, and hope. It’s being saved for doing the work of God in the world – showing compassion, seeking justice, giving generously, and loving more fully every day.

God cares about those who are outsiders, forgotten, and overlooked. God cares about all people and loves us so much that God would come to be with us. And when we know that good news, God calls us – even us - to be messengers who share that salvation has come!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.